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Exploring the impact on the health and well-being of young adults' participation in 'The Club'

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Abstract

This study explores the impact of creative arts on the health and well-being of six selected young adults who participated in productions at a performance and entertainment venture ('The Club'). The qualitative design incorporates in-depth interviews with performers and producers to uncover their stories and experiences, from which key themes are drawn. The study uncovers a number of physical, mental and psychosocial benefits, including empowerment, the learning of new skills, creating and maintaining positive relationships, enhanced confidence and resilience, opportunities for self-expression, and engagement in meaningful activities. Challenges to well-being are also elicited regarding the sometimes negative impact of creative roles on health and well-being. The findings align with evidence from previous studies about the benefits of creative arts in terms of health and well-being promotion. Suggestions for community-based interventions incorporating creative arts are made, including the need for further research in this area.

Keywords

creative arts

health

well-being

performance art

health promotion

young adults

Background

The construct of well-being is complex to define as it is experienced subjectively. Staricoff et al. (2004) suggest that a person can be physically ill, yet still maintain well-being since it is a state of acceptance of the mind, body and spirit. The UK Department of Health's suggested definition of well-being is: a positive state of mind and body, feeling safe and able to cope, with a sense of connection with people, communities and the wider environment (Department of Health 2010: 12).

Marmot (2010) highlights the importance of social networks and social participation, which act as protective factors to health and are consistently and positively associated with reduced morbidity and mortality. Marmot also draws attention to strong evidence that social relationships can reduce the risk of depression, and that people with stronger networks are happier and healthier.

The arts and their links with health and well-being is a growing area of research, and their impact on individuals as well as communities is becoming more recognized. There is strong advocacy for, and substantial use of, arts and creative activities to address social and cultural drivers of poor health, tackling health inequalities, and for conveying health promotion activities (Clift et al. 2011; Daykin et al. 2008; Carson et al. 2007; McDonald et al. 1999). A growing body of evidence also highlights the physical, psychological and social benefits provided by participating in creative arts activities, including the opportunity to participate in meaningful activities, enhanced social integration, interaction and connectedness, confidence, self-esteem, mood and concentration, the learning of new skills and increased levels of well-being (Clift and Camic 2015; Manship and Hatzidimitriadou 2015; Ings et al. 2012; Reynolds and Vivat 2010; Timmons and Macdonald 2008; D'Lima 2004; Wikström 2002; Calman 2000).

The New Economics Foundation (2008) have produced a set of evidence-based actions that aim to help people to understand the simple steps they can take to improve their lives. These ‘Five Ways to Wellbeing’ (connecting with others; being active; noticing things; maintaining learning; and giving) are now widely adopted in health promotion initiatives and interventions. Evidence suggests that social relationships are critical for promoting well-being and for acting as a buffer against mental ill health (Akers et al. 2008; Jenkins et al. 2008), and that social networks promote a sense of belonging and well-being (Morrow 2001). Regular physical activity is associated with a greater sense of well-being and lower rates of depression and anxiety (Biddle and Ekkekakis 2005), and Graham Pole (2006) suggests that the arts can offer gentle physical activity which distracts individuals from pain as well as anxiety. However, Goswami (2008) suggests that not enough is known about the type, frequency, intensity or duration of exercise to effectively improve well-being. Practicing mindfulness has also been shown to predict positive mental health states, self-regulated behaviour and heightened self-knowledge, which is thought to be important for well-being (Brown and Ryan 2003; Goswami 2008). Adult learning has been correlated with positive effects on well-being, reports of life satisfaction, optimism and efficacy (Feinstein and Hammond 2004; Feinstein et al. 2008). Feelings of happiness and life satisfaction have been strongly associated with active participation in social and community life (Lyubomirsky et al. 2005; Huppert 2008). Despite the promising results of these studies, Akers et al. (2008) suggest that more work needs to be carried out on intervention-based strategies to better understand issues of causality, effect size and favourable conditions for sustainable behaviour change.

Eudaimonia is a concept that sees well-being as an active phenomenon characterized by meaningful engagement, relationships and personal growth (Swindells et al. 2013). Swindells et al. (2013) suggest that arts and health research is compatible with the field of

eudaimonia since its interest is in human flourishing and understanding of wellness as more than an absence of dysfunction or disease. Furthermore, Waterman (1993) posits that eudaimonia is associated with personal expressiveness and self-realization, which can both be experienced through performing arts. The elements of the Five Ways to Wellbeing (NEF 2008) and eudaimonia share common well-being themes and relate to building resilience, which is important for positive mental health and well-being, through taking part in activities which are meaningful (Oliver et al. 2006) and experiencing feelings of connectedness (Stewart et al. 2004). The concepts are also linked with a sense of belonging, which has been highlighted as one possible outcome of artistic engagement in research (White 2003; Stickley 2012).

Theatre-based interventions for the promotion and protection of health and well-being is an area of applied arts that is increasingly seeing more interest (Plourde et al. 2014). Performance-based work can take a person-centred approach to communication of health messages and recognize that appreciates the experiences of individuals, enhancing inclusion for those who feel isolated (Low 2010). Torrissen (2015) suggested that collaborative theatre projects provide radically different solutions to the health problems encountered by individuals than those offered by the biomedical model of health, since they focus on resources, personhood, enablement, social support and empowerment to promote health and well-being, rather than on treatment and diagnosis. Beswick (2012) reports on the role that a National Youth Theatre educational outreach initiative played in the opportunity structures for young people, in addition to issues of representation and aspiration.

However, performance also has particular associated challenges and has been recognized as a potentially stress-inducing activity. Fancourt et al. (2015) examined the impact on professional singers of singing in a low-stress performance situation and a high-stress live concert. Results show a significant decrease in the cortisol and cortisone levels

across the low-stress condition, which suggests that singing in itself is stress-reducing and possibly health promoting. In the high-stress condition there were significant increases in cortisol and cortisone levels of participants, suggesting that responses are modulated by the conditions of performance. Kreutz and Brünger (2012) explored the negative associations with amateur choral singing, uncovering key themes including social relations and interactions, for example with the conductor or fellow choristers, and musical and aesthetic issues, including the demands of performing.

There is a paucity of specific research looking at performance arts and young adult participants, in contrast to numerous studies focused on children and young people and older adults. Young adults are the so called ‘sandwich generation’ (Carson et al. 2007), typically having numerous responsibilities and conflicting demands on their time, such as careers, further education, caring roles (as parents to young children, to spouses and/or to ageing parents) and financial burdens. Carson et al. suggests that people at this stage of their life will be affected not just by their own issues but also those relating to children and the aged. The aim of this study was to elicit the experiences of six selected young adults who participate in a performance and entertainment venture (‘The Club’) and explore the resulting impact on their health and well-being.

‘The Club’ was established by two co-producers as a commercial performance and entertainment venture, using a community centre venue in the south-east of England to host regular event nights every two to three months. The producers had an extensive knowledge and passion for the arts, and their aim was to provide the local community with the opportunity to experience the kind of entertainment more likely to be found in London (an hour away by train). Performers at ‘The Club’ include singers, dancers, poets, comedians, puppeteers and burlesque acts, many of whom were new artists looking for the opportunity to perform their material in front of an audience for the first time. Others were more established

performers showcasing their acts, touring or testing new material. A theme was agreed by the producers for each event, from which participants devised their own performance material using their particular medium. Occasionally, participants co-created performance pieces with each other, in pairs or in small groups, and the brief and theme were entirely open to their interpretation. Participants took part in rehearsals in the lead up to event nights, with direction provided by the producers of ‘The Club’ as necessary. The majority of the performers, as well as its two producers, were ‘young adults’ (defined as 24–40 years of age for the purposes of this study).

Methods

This study adopted a qualitative approach incorporating one to one in-depth interviews with participants to elicit their experiences and retrospective stories. Interview data were analysed thematically, using NVivo 10 software to aid organization and coding, moving from initial coding based on the broad topics covered by the interview schedule to a more discrete analysis of the richer information provided by participants. A constant comparative approach (Strauss and Corbin 1990) was used, in which the researcher moved back and forth between emerging themes and the original data to check that the themes represented a good summary of the participants’ meanings.

Participants

Purposive sampling was used whereby participants were selected on the basis of predetermined inclusion criteria: involvement in ‘The Club’ (in a production, performance or participatory capacity); age (between 24 and 40); and ability to articulate in English. Six was felt to be an optimum number of participants for this study within the time constraints of the

research period and the fact that in-depth interviews were likely to yield a substantial amount of data for analysis. Details of the six participants can be found in Table 1.

Table 1: Participant characteristics.

Participant	Age	Role
Performer A	26	Compère
Performer B	24	Dancer/poet/singer
Performer C	34	Burlesque
Performer D	35	Extra/stage hand
Producer A	32	Producer/Director
Producer B	35	Producer/Director

Procedure

One to one in-depth interviews were conducted by the researcher with each participant. An interview schedule was developed which included questions to uncover the experiences and stories of participants, including where and when their involvement in creative arts began, whether engagement was important to them, if they had benefited from participation in ‘The Club’, and any negative experiences they had encountered. Although the schedule was followed to ensure that all elements were explored, it was not rigidly applied to enable participants to answer freely and the researcher to ask additional questions where appropriate. One interview was conducted per participant at a location convenient to them (their home or place of work), and all were approximately one hour in length. Interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim by the researcher, who assigned each participant with a

code to ensure anonymity and maintain confidentiality with regards to the quotes presented in the results. Additionally, the researcher made brief field notes after each interview to record any relevant reflections and details.

Ethical clearance was obtained through the university research ethics committee. Further levels of ethical clearance were not required since the interviews were not asking questions of a sensitive nature. Since the research did not access healthcare staff or patients there was no requirement for the study to be subjected to NHS ethical approval.

Findings

All participants reported that they had been creative from a young age. Their hobby and leisure time had been spent in a variety of creative ways, either drawn to the arts in general or a particular medium. All participants shared stories of their ‘creative journeys’ and conveyed a sense of having followed a creative path. The interview data uncovered key themes, which are discussed below.

Learning and challenging

Involvement in ‘The Club’ helped participants rediscover old interests, as well as allowed them to try something new. All participants spoke about challenging themselves and a sense of increased confidence and personal growth, as a quote from one participant highlights:

I’m a terrible person for saying yes to things that I don’t really want to do because they terrify me, but sometimes that little voice says, oh do it anyway [...] [there is] a wonderful buzz when you’ve done it and feel like it’s gone well. (Performer C)

There was a sense of purpose and optimism experienced by all participants through challenging perceptions and stereotypes, such as around identity and body image, and addressing issues including equality, discrimination, and taboo subjects (death, sexual attraction).

Positive relationships

Forming mutually supportive relationships and bonds with others through their involvement in creative arts was mentioned by every participant. There was evidence of ‘The Club’ aiding the initiation, renewal and development of social exchange by bringing like-minded people together in a constructive setting. Three of the six participants spoke about the positive feelings experienced through being part of something larger than themselves, of belonging to a collective or team. One participant saw their involvement in the creative arts as vital to ensuring they were socially active:

I often say to my friends, my close friends, that if I wasn’t involved in performance art and writing and going to gigs and performing and stuff like that, then I’d be really unsociable, unpleasant hermit type critic character [...] It’s my social life in many ways. (Performer A)

Opportunity and empowerment

One of the most important elements of ‘The Club’ for the producers was to empower individuals by giving them the opportunity to perform, and to gain experience and confidence. As a result, transformations were noticed in performers who were often getting paid for the first time and were enabled to prove their talents and capabilities to themselves and others.

In addition, non-performers who were interested in being involved in ‘The Club’ were encouraged to make a positive contribution in ways which suited them, for example with set design, dressing the venue and assisting with the running of the event.

Confidence and resilience

Half of the participants referred to lacking self-confidence in the past, and shared with the researcher that their involvement in ‘The Club’ was helpful in overcoming these issues. One participant felt rewarded by observing the positive impact involvement in ‘The Club’ had on a performer:

There’s one of our performers who is unbelievably talented, yet when she first went onstage she spent most of her act apologising [...] to give her that confidence to carry on going out there and doing it, and see her evolve and stretch and do these different things. (Producer B)

Meaningful engagement

All participants saw their involvement in ‘The Club’ as a means of self-expression, a place in which they could communicate aspects of their personality as well as their ideas. Participants spoke about realizing a sense of purpose through their involvement in the creative arts, and the importance of being engaged in meaningful activity that also resonated with them on a personal level:

Actually finally after years and years of kind of going round the houses and doing this and doing that and changing course and direction, and feeling really frustrated, and

feeling like I was never going to really find my calling that this has just been in, you know. I feel like it's my calling. (Producer A)

Impact on physical and mental health

All participants reflected that their involvement in 'The Club' had given them the opportunity to be more active and had enhanced their physical health. Additionally, they all spoke about the impact that their performing had on their mental health, one stating the cathartic nature of the creative arts:

Emotionally it's a release, like a therapy tool, to exorcize demons in a sense. What I get out of it is mental stability. I think I'd be a gibbering little hermit if I didn't engage in the arts. I suffer with anxiety, and I suppose performance is a great external mechanism. (Performer A)

All participants spoke about experiencing adversity and personal trauma, including suffering the loss of a pregnancy, employment and family issues, relationship break ups, and mental health issues including depression and anxiety. However, they all reported that 'The Club' had been a positive alternative focus which had helped them to manage their challenges more effectively.

Despite the many positive benefits, the producers in particular also reflected on negative aspects of being involved in 'The Club', particularly in terms of their physical and mental health. Since 'The Club' was run solely by volunteers who already led full and busy lives, they often felt that they struggled to balance their input, time and energy alongside full-time jobs, children and other responsibilities, as these quotes from the interviews with the producers illustrate:

It does take a lot of you, it's a struggle, it is really hard. There are worries, things out of your control. For your own health you need to be able to let go. (Producer A)

It's physically intensive, our health suffers as a result of putting it on – dressing a room and pulling down a room, you know. I've been at work for five days and then I come straight out of work and do set, props, build, pull down, then suddenly I'm back at work again. I haven't had any time for myself. Although 'The Club' is creating wellbeing in many ways there are times where I feel completely, utterly swamped with panic. (Producer B)

Discussion

Empowerment was a recurring theme reported by participants in terms of what they felt they had gained from being involved in 'The Club'. As suggested by Scriven (2010), a fundamental aspect of health promotion is empowering people to have more control over aspects of their lives that affect their health. This health promotion approach values individual autonomy and seeks to enhance the skills and confidence of a group or community (Naidoo and Wills 2009; Beattie 1991), which were also outcomes for the participants in this study. The findings also echo the suggestion of Torrissen (2015) that collaborative theatre projects and their focus on personhood and empowerment is an important means of promoting health and well-being.

Learning new skills was an important outcome for participants through their involvement in 'The Club'. Previous research highlights the correlation between learning and well-being, satisfaction, optimism and efficacy (Feinstein and Hammond 2004; Feinstein et al. 2008). Additionally, participants felt they were providing a learning experience for others

through challenging perceptions with their acts, which aligns with previous research findings regarding the ability of theatre and performance-based work to appreciate the experiences of individuals (Low 2010), and enhance representation and aspiration (Beswick 2012).

A key theme elicited from the data was the opportunities that arose through involvement with ‘The Club’ for creating and maintaining friendships. Oliver et al. (2006) suggest that meaningful participation enhances feelings of connectedness, belonging and valued participation, which strengthens capacity and promotes the skills that help to reduce mental health problems and build resilience. Furthermore, positive social relationships and networks are a characteristic of eudaimonia (Swindells et al. 2013), and these findings also align with a number of similar studies that cite a range of psychosocial benefits of involvement in the arts, including increased personal and social opportunities, decreased social isolation and promotion a sense of belonging and well-being (Calman 2000; Morrow 2001; Wikström 2002; D’Lima 2004; Akers et al. 2008; Clift et al 2008; Timmons and Macdonald 2008; Jenkins et al. 2008; Baldwin 2009; Reynolds and Vivat 2010; Clift et al. 2011; Potter 2014).

Eudaimonic well-being requires participation in activities that feel challenging and effortful and facilitate personal growth (Swindells et al. 2013), something that all participants in this study reported experiencing. Earl (2007) discussed the element of utilitarianism in health promotion interventions – doing the greatest good for the greatest number of people – however suggested that it is not always possible to simultaneously do good (beneficence) and avoid harm (non-maleficence). Previous studies suggest that there may be negative associations with amateur performance related to demands of performing, social relations and interactions and the fact that it can prove to be a stress-inducing activity (Kreutz and Brünger 2012; Fancourt et al. 2015). Interestingly, in this study there were no clear negative associations between performing and well-being for participants, but the producers of ‘The

Club’ reported a detrimental impact on their health and well-being, particularly in terms of stress and fatigue. This finding echoes the responses in Fancourt et al.’s (2015) participants in the high stress performance condition, and may in part be due to the ongoing requirement for the producers to organize and host numerous shows per year and their responsibility for the set-up, running and take down of each event, whereas performers took ownership of their own act and were less involved in the operational activities of ‘The Club’. This finding may also shed some further light on Goswami’s (2008) query around what type, frequency, intensity and duration of physical activity is conducive to positive well-being.

Participants reported overcoming personal problems, traumatic events and adversity in their lives through their involvement in creative arts. They reported that their participation in ‘The Club’ provided a means of escapism and catharsis, as well as a positive ‘in the moment’ focus, which aligns with the practice of mindfulness, thought to be important for maintaining well-being (Brown and Ryan 2003; Goswami 2008).

Conclusion

The findings of this study suggest that engagement in ‘The Club’, as well as creative arts in general, has a positive impact on the health and well-being of young adult participants, and that involvement provides more benefits than challenges.

Themes emerging from interview data clearly align with previous studies that highlight key contributors to positive well-being, including engaging in meaningful activity, forming and maintaining positive relationships with like-minded others, experiencing learning and personal growth, regular physical activity, realizing purpose and improving confidence and resilience.

Empowerment was one of the key benefits that participants associated with their experience of being involved in ‘The Club’. The approach of ‘The Club’, perhaps

inadvertently, had a number of health promotion benefits for those involved. By taking a person-centred approach and providing participants with the opportunity to be involved, express themselves, and gain experience, skills, knowledge, the producers enabled them to feel empowered and confident, which proved to be a catalyst for realizing their creative potential and contributed to their resilience in overcoming adversities.

Despite the promising results of this and other studies, Akers et al. (2008) suggest that more work needs to be carried out on intervention-based strategies to better understand issues of causality, effect size and favourable conditions for sustainable well-being effects. However, acknowledging the value of the creative arts and culture as a major determinant of subjective well-being can be conducive to novel, challenging approaches to the design and implementation of public health strategies across the life-course.

This study addressed some of the gaps in the current literature around arts and health. It focused specifically on the impact of involvement in creative arts of young adults (aged 24–40), who are likely to experience competing demands on their time in the form of children and other dependents, and careers. The study sought the views and experiences of the facilitators (producers) of ‘The Club’ as well as participants, which provided an angle that very few other studies have explored. In contrast to much of the current research, it elicited the negative and unintended outcomes, particularly for the producers/facilitators, as well as the positive. The fact that the facilitators appeared to experience more negative impacts than the performers was interesting to discover and highlights some of the issues around health and safety and workload that need to be taken into account for both commercial and community-based health promotion interventions involving the arts going forward.

Limitations

Naturally, there are limitations to this study. Six participants is a small number and therefore it is difficult for results to be generalized to the wider population. Although results may not be representative of the wider population, there is a long tradition in science of building inferences from cases (Riessman 2002: 263). Lincoln and Guba (1985: 290) suggest that what is more important than the results being representative is the element of their ‘trustworthiness’, that findings are credible, transferable, dependable and confirmable.

The study highlights the need for further research in the area of creative arts, and the impact of interventions on health and well-being, that is longitudinal, uses larger sample sizes and involves the use of control groups to further establish causation. Further research could focus on whether performance has particular issues not experienced by participants involved in other forms of participatory arts activities, and whether the impacts experienced in this study differ across other populations.

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